Southeast Asia Violent Ideology Seminar

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Abstract: The Southeast Asia Violent Ideology Seminar (SEAVIS), a multi-agency political-military exchange forum, brought together 150 representatives from the Asia-Pacific region and North America. Attendees examined regional threats, and outlined both unconventional and conventional influence approaches to countering extremist activities.

The Joint Information Operations Warfare Command (JIOWC) hosted the Southeast Asia Violent Ideology Strategy Seminar (SEAVIS) from 31 October – 3 November 2006, in San Antonio, Texas. US Pacific Command (PACOM), Special Operations Command-Pacific (SOCPAC) and the Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) jointly sponsored the event. The Rendon Group (TRG) served as primary facilitators and strategic communications consultants. The goal of this gathering was to generate potential information operation activities to support US Pacific Command (PACOM) efforts in their area of responsibility (AOR). The seminar brought together more than 130 members of academic and research institutions, defense laboratories, the Department of State, and the information operations (IO) and intelligence communities. The desired outcome included both a shared understanding of violent ideology in the PACOM AOR—specifically Southeast Asia (SEA)—and the outline of a shared strategy for affecting future extremism in the region. Experts from academia, the US government (USG), and industry identified new approaches to countering this threat, leveraging a variety of social, cultural and psychological data. The forum demonstrated an organizational and concept framework which other IO organizations may find useful in building similar regional initiatives.

Background

Presently, the US and its Coalition partners are engaged in a global conflict, with real terrorists seeking to attack our interests. Secondly, we are engaged in a Long War originally comprised of potential terrorists, some of whom are alive—and some of whom are not yet born. Over the past five years, this war has shifted from potential terrorists to potential allies. These entities exist at an individual level, and not just at the level of the nation state. Success is dependent upon building support one by one, individual by individual, turning the "Street" against the terrorists.

The conference was designed to enable attendees to understand the evolving threats generated by violent ideologies. Afterward, participants generated engagement recommendations that leveraged existing and potential support, to mitigate negative forces at play in the region.

Methodology

The forum began by establishing a common baseline understanding of some of the major regional players, attitudes, and issues. The group heard subject matter expert (SME)

Cross-cultural communications: relief worker provides language tips to Indonesian students. (Defense Link)

briefings from country experts, topic experts, and experienced information operators outlining the current violent ideology situation:

- Radical group trends in SEA
- Policy objectives of the USG in SEA
- The SEA information environment
- Curbing militant recruitment in SEA
- Islamic extremism in SEA
- Identification of audiences
- Identification of messages and messengers
- ID innovative message delivery systems
- Identification of wild card events
- Identification of threats and opportunities

Seminar Process

Organizers drew participants from several communities: active and retired government service; personnel with experience designing and implementing strategic communications or public diplomacy operations during their service; private sector experts in fields with similar experience in corporate and political endeavors; personnel with regional subject matter expertise, and foreign military and diplomats. JIOWC and TRG chose this mix of experience levels and viewpoints to encourage non-traditional and unconventional discussions. Such a cross section of individuals helped generate approaches to audiences and activities that traditional IO planning groups may not otherwise identify.

US Navy personnel evacuate a patient during an Indonesian medical exercise. (US Navy)

Strategic Considerations

This phase included a series of interactive knowledge harvesting exercises in order to identify strategic considerations for information activity development. These exercises identified potential audiences, messages, messengers (including possible third-party validators), message delivery systems, and wild card issues. Forum participants discussed Coalition and partner nation strengths and weaknesses through round-table discussions and an interactive exercise. In the Long War, coalitions remain a primary center of gravity for the US.

US Policy

A frequent observation among interagency planners is gaining access to the "big picture"—those highest-level objectives necessary for common understanding. In this forum a DoS official outlined broad policy goals and public diplomacy objectives for the US in SEA. Regional policy is based on long-term US strategic objective: a world which is democratic, prosperous, stable, secure, and at peace. The three primary US public diplomacy strategic imperatives in SEA are:

• Offer people a positive vision of hope rooted in common beliefs about freedom, justice, opportunity and respect for all

• Isolate and marginalize violent extremists and amplify moderation

• Foster a sense of common values and interests among various countries in the region

US transformational diplomacy efforts support regional reforms to promote democracy and good governance, foster broad-based and sustainable economic development, strengthen their societies, and make them stronger partners.

Messaging

In this segment, participants identified and discussed messages Coalition members should be develop and test for use. Each participant was given time to develop possible general messages/actions, then discuss more specific intent for follow-on development. The first principle of messaging directed US and Coalition/partner nation governments must provide timely, truthful and accurate information.

Facilitators led an interactive knowledge-based exercise to identify direct and indirect messengers (3PVs). In this session, each participant presented both productive and counterproductive messengers, and when appropriate, linked the messengers to the messages identified during the earlier breakout sessions. While the US government has a legitimate right and responsibility to message, we must recognize that the US—for many of our audiences—is our own worst messenger. Accordingly, most messaging activities should focus on the identification, recruiting and placement of proper validation.

3PVs

Forum members also identified some of the most significant elements for success: 3rd party validators (3PV). Organizations seeking to earn the public's trust need to do more than engage in trustworthy behavior; they must have their actions verified by third-party sources that are themselves credible. These are individuals, governments or organizations that can effectively deliver a message to a specific audience. Often, 3PVs can be used to reach audiences with whom the USG has limited access or limited credibility. Validators may deliver messages either with or without knowledge that they are assisting the US of Coalition partners. Of course, this makes 3PV selection a politically and culturally sensitive process.

Wild Cards

In turn, the group identified possible future events, both likely and unlikely—so-called "wild cards"—that would affect SEA and US policy towards the region. Many events can be defined as worst case scenarios for the US in the region, but others introduce an element of instability in which the outcome, positive or negative, is simply unknown. For this segment, participants offered scenarios that would positively or negatively affect the situation, from both a threat and opportunity perspective. Most scenarios looked at the next 12-24 months, with particular emphasis on the changing political situation in the region, and possible external key events that could affect internal information operations activities.

Malaysian/US sports exchange. (Defense Link)

Audiences

Target audience discussions examined both external and internal groups. The lists below come from the round-table exercises, as well as breakout working groups and sidebar discussions. Not all audiences are accessible by all USG agencies or partner countries, so addressing certain audiences requires interagency coordination. The breakout groups identified these internal audiences, describing principle groups the USG hopes to positively influence:

- Political Leaders
- Military and Security Leaders
- The Street: common or average persons
- Elites: persons/entities of power
- Opinion Leaders
- Non-traditional media
- Commercial Industry
- Terrorist and Other Violent Groups
- Academia

External (international) audiences consist of these entities:

- Audiences in the US
- International governments and organizations
- Regional political/social groups
- International opinion-makers
- Business
- Military
- Academia
- Religious groups
- Terrorist groups and supporters

Again, the inherent legal, political, and relational issues of these choices require third party validation.

Message Delivery

The group examined the five types of message delivery systems: personal contact initiatives; mail delivery systems; information technology and telecommunications; news, information and entertainment (earned media); and lastly, advertising and visibility (paid media). The following provides a few representative examples, traditional and non-traditional, which IO planners may want to examine:

- Personal contacts
    - Education alumni groups
    - SEA Diaspora: communities/extended families
    - Cleric exchanges: Moderate Imams
    - Youth exchange programs
- Mail delivery systems
    - Personal correspondence: letters home
    - Professional correspondence
    - Educational: schoolbooks/associated materials
    - Invitations: weddings and birthday day parties
    - Gift mail
    - E-mail intercepts or alterations
- Information, technology/telecommunications
    - Telemarketing, telephone banks, surveys
    - Telex & fax transmissions

- Online databases, discussion groups
- Video teleconferencing
- CD-ROM/DVD
- Personal digital assistant (PDA)
- Mass e-mail
- Web sites & blogs: including closed (password)
- Short messaging service: mobile phone texting
- Cyber cafés
- Massive multi-player online role-playing games
- News, information and entertainment
    - AM/FM/Short wave legacy radio, satellite radio
    - Commercial newspapers
    - Television
    - Mainstream magazines/interviews
    - Traveling street theater
    - Songs/contests for young musicians
- Advertising and visibility
    - Collateral materials: free giveaways
    - Promotional products for computers
    - Printed receipts or invoices
    - Phone cards
    - Transit advertising: Airport, bus, taxi and subway
    - Packaging materials: throwaway wrappers
    - Public sculptures: honor a specific event
    - Hollywood product placement

Conclusions

The overwhelming majority of attendees found this a useful and productive experience. Regardless of region, the SEAVIS methodology offers a useful construct for identifying and discussing the range of external and internal audience issues needed to craft a coherent shared strategy. While highlighting numerous US/coalition opportunities, the group clearly recognized significant threats involved in countering violent ideology. Finally, careful identification of messages, messengers and delivery systems, as well as potential "wild card" events, help illustrate just how significantly actions may alter the information operations playing field. ✐